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Twenty-five Imperial Seals of the Qing Dynasty

Large Medium Small Printer



Period: Qing dynasty (1644-1911)

Date: undated

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"Twenty-five Seals" refers to those that the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736-1795) designated as symbols of imperial authority.

Before the Qianlong Emperor, the number of imperial seals was not set. At the beginning of his reign, there were thirty-nine imperial seals in twenty-nine categories. Due to inconsistent records, confusion over their identification and functions led to abuse of the seals. Therefore, in 1746, the Qianlong Emperor re-identified and classified the seals of the former emperors. He selected twenty-five and specified their various functions.

To begin with, except for the green jade Seal of the Emperor that was written in Manchu, the others all had two scripts: primitive Manchu and Chinese seal script (*zhuan shu*). In 1748, Manchu seal script was created and, in order to keep a unified legend, the emperor commanded that twenty-one seals be re-carved while the remaining four that had been used before the Manchu conquest should not be changed.

Originally, each of the twenty-five seals was contained in a double-layer seal case, which was made of wood and incised with beautiful patterns. The cases were covered with yellow silk embroidered with dragon patterns and placed on tables on either side of the throne in the Hall of Union (*Jiaotai dian*).

These seals, which have exquisite carvings as well as various materials and knobs, are historically significant ritual artifacts of the Qing dynasty. Their legends and functions are listed below.

1. "Seal of Receiving Instructions of the Great Qing" (*Da Qing shouming zhibao*)

Height: 12 cm, Seal surface: 14×14 cm

White jade Coiling-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters

Used when demonstrating the Manchu rulers' orthodox legitimacy

2. "Seal of the Emperor Worshipping Heaven" (*Huangdi fengtian zhibao*)

Height: 15.2cm Seal surface: 14×14 cm

Dark green nephrite Coiling-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters

Used when displaying the emperor's respect and obedience to heaven

3. "Seal of Great Qing Imperial Successor" (*Da Qing si tianzi bao*)

Height: 7.6 cm, Seal surface: 7.9×7.9 cm

Gold Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters
Used when displaying the orthodox legitimacy of the newly enthroned emperor

4. "Seal of the Emperor" (*Huangdi zhibao*)

Height: 9.5 cm, Seal surface: 12.5×12.5 cm
Green jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu characters in seal script
Used when delivering decrees and amnesties

In 1748, the Qianlong Emperor's description of this seal reads, "The green jade Seal of the Emperor has Manchu characters in seal script, and was made in the era of Hung Taiji (r. 1592-1643)." At that time, the seal script of the Manchu characters was not sophisticated. After it was developed and standardized in 1748, the Manchu seal script was used on imperial seals.

5. "Seal of the Emperor" (*Huangdi zhibao*)

Height: 16.6 cm, Seal surface: 15.5×15.5cm
Sandalwood Coiling-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters

Used when issuing proclamations on regulations and rituals
The archives of the Qing dynasty reveal that this seal was used more frequently than any other imperial seal.

6. "Seal of the Son of Heaven" (*Tianzi zhibao*)

Height: 6.4 cm, Seal surface: 7.8×7.8cm
White jade

Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script Used when offering sacrifices to deities of the imperial cult

7. "Emperor's Seal for Respected Imperial Family" (*Huangdi zunqin zhibao*)

Height: 6.1 cm, Seal surface: 6.8×6.8cm
White jade Coiling-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when granting honorary posthumous titles to immediate imperial family members

8. "Emperor's Seal for Cherished Imperial Family" (*Huangdi qinqin zhibao*)

Height: 7.7 cm, Seal surface: 7.2×7.2 cm
White jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when showing support and affection for the flourishing imperial house

9. "Seal of the Benevolent Administration of the Emperor" (*Huangdi xingbao*)

Height: 13 cm, Seal surface: 15.6×15.6cm
Dark green nephrite Squatting-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when the emperor making rewards and bestowing favors

10. "Seal of the Prestige of the Emperor" (*Huangdi xinbao*)

Height: 6.5 cm, Seal surface: 10.5×10.5 cm
White jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when commending armed forces for wars and suppressions

11. "Seal of the Benevolent Administration of the Son of Heaven" (*Tianzi xingbao*)

Height: 13.8 cm, Seal surface: 15.5×15.5cm
Dark green nephrite Crouching-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when conferring honorary titles on a vassal states

12. "Seal of the Prestige of the Son of Heaven" (*Tianzi xinbao*)

Height: 8.5 cm, Seal surface: 12.1×12.1cm
Green jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when issuing commands to vassal states and regions

13. "Seal of Respecting Heaven and Being Diligent for the People" (*Jingtian qinmin zhibao*)

Height: 9.8 cm, Seal surface: 10×10cm
White jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob

Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when admonishing officials

14. "Seal of Delivering Instructions" (*Zhigao zhibao*)
Height: 14.7 cm, Seal surface: 13×13 cm
Green jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when issuing imperial decisions to senior officials
15. "Seal of Issuing Administrative Decisions" (*Chiming zhibao*)
Height: 9 cm, Seal surface: 11.3×11.3 cm
Dark green nephrite Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when delivering the emperor's administrative decisions to officials of lower rank
16. "Seal of Propagating Moral Standards" (*Chuixun zhibao*)
Height: 10.5 cm, Seal surface: 13×13cm
Dark green nephrite Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when propagating moral standards and laws
17. "Seal of Honoring Virtuous People" (*Mingde zhibao*)
Height: 10.4 cm, Seal surface: 13×13 cm
Green jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when honoring either loyal officials or virtuous people
18. "Seal of Valuing Literature" (*Qinwen zhixi*)
Height: 9.8 cm, Seal surface: 11.7×11.7 cm
Black jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when praising literature and culture
19. "Seal of Esteeming Classical Books and Historical Records" (*Biaozhang jingshi zhibao*)
Height: 13.2 cm, Seal surface: 15.3×15.3 cm
Dark green nephrite Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when esteeming instructions in classical books and historical documents
20. "Seal of Imperial Inspection Tour" (*Xunshou tianxia zhibao*)
Height: 13.3 cm, Seal surface: 15.3×15.3 cm
Green jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used on trips outside the Imperial Palaces when issuing orders
21. "Seal of Sending Punitive Forces and Pacifying People" (*Taozui anmin zhibao*)
Height: 13.9 cm, Seal surface: 15.3×15.3cm
Green jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when declaring wars and sending troops
22. "Seal of Controlling the Forces of the Empire" (*Zhiyu liushi zhibao*)
Height: 10.8 cm, Seal surface: 17×17cm
Black jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when controlling and organizing the military
23. "Seal of Issuing Declarations to Foreign States" (*Chizheng wanbang zhibao*)
Height: 10.7 cm, Seal surface: 13×13cm
Green jade Entwining-dragon-shaped
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when issuing declarations to foreign countries for diplomatic purposes
24. "Seal of Declaring Proclamation to the People" (*Chizheng wanmin zhibao*)
Height: 10.4 cm, Seal surface: 12.6×12.6 cm
Green jade Coiling-dragon-shaped
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when announcing administrative issues to people of the empire
25. "Seal of Declaring to Extensive Territory" (*Guangyun zhibao*)
Height: 15.6 cm, Seal surface: 19×19 cm

Black jade Entwining-dragon-shaped knob
Manchu and Chinese characters both in seal script
Used when signing and sealing a document